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Sixth Form Girls and Bisexual Burden

Eric Anderson *University of Winchester, UK*

Mark McCormack *Durham University, UK*

Matthew Ripley *University of Southern California, USA*

Corresponding Author:

Professor Eric Anderson – EricAndersonPhD@aol.com – 01962 827040

Professor Eric Anderson is a sociologist who examines the intersection of sexualities and masculinities among youth. He is the author of *Inclusive Masculinity: The Changing Nature of Masculinities* (Routledge, 2009); *The Monogamy Gap: Men, Love and the Reality of Cheating* (Oxford University Press, 2012); *Sport, Theory and Social Problems: A Critical Introduction* (Routledge, 2010); and *21st Century Jocks: Sporting Men and Modern Heterosexuality* (Palgrave 2014); and co-author of *Bisexual Men's Lives* (Columbia 2014). Address: The University of Winchester, Sparkford Road, Winchester, Hampshire. SO22 4NR. UK

Email: EricAndersonPhD@gmail.com

Dr. Mark McCormack is a Lecturer of Sociology at Durham University. His research examines the impact of decreasing cultural homophobia on youth in educational and sporting settings. He is author of *The Declining Significance of Homophobia: How Teenage Boys are Redefining Masculinity and Heterosexuality* (Oxford University Press, 2012) and co-author of *Bisexual Men's Lives* (Columbia 2014).

Address: School of Applied Social Sciences, Durham University, 32 Old Elvet, Durham, UK. DH1 3HN.

E-mail: mark.mccormack@durham.ac.uk

Matthew Ripley is a sociology graduate student at the University of Southern California. His research focuses on the intersection of sport, masculinity and sexuality. He has been published in multiple, internationally recognised journals.

Address: USC Dana and David Dornsife, College of Letter, Arts & Sciences, Department of Sociology. 851 Downey Way, Hazel & Stanley Hall 314, Los Angeles, CA 90089-2539. USA.

Email: matthewripley1989@gmail.com

Sixth Form Girls and Bisexual burden

Much of the literature concerning sexual minorities describes various forms of social mistreatment, alongside the psychological ill-effects of minority stress. However, bisexual individuals are often described as having additional burdens compared to other sexual minorities. We conceptualise the collective of these social problems as 'bisexual burden,' and examine for it through the lived experiences of 15 openly bisexual girls (aged 16-17) from sixth form colleges throughout the United Kingdom. We show that, among this cohort, decreasing cultural stigma attached to sexual minorities results in participants being more accepted by their heterosexual and gay peers, compared to previous literature; mostly without the negative components of bisexual burden. We find that when mistreatment does occur, it does so immediately after she comes out; however, this diminishes quickly due to the cultural unacceptability of homo/biphobia in these settings.

Keywords: bisexuality, bisexual burden, biphobia, female, youth, sexuality

Theorizing Bisexual Burden

Sexual minorities, whether gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered or otherwise identified are largely thought to suffer socially and emotionally in a culture that privileges heterosexuality. Meyer (2003) develops minority stress theory as an effective way to examine how sexual minorities experience chronic stress which stems from stigmatisation in the broader culture, including psychological burdens distinct from heterosexual populations (Hatzenbuehler 2009). Accordingly, there is considerable research highlighting elevated psycho-social problems for sexual minorities compared to heterosexuals (Brooks 1981, D'Augelli *et al.* 2001).

However, it is important to recognise that the experiences of all sexual minorities are not the same. When analyzing bisexuals as distinct from gays and lesbians, for example, evidence suggests that the lived bisexual experience is more complicated, and perhaps more stressful, than that of lesbians or gay men (Burleson 2005, Ripley *et al.* 2011, Robinson and Espelage 2011). The burden of being bisexual has been argued to be elevated above that of gays and lesbians because, in addition to experiencing discrimination at the hands of heterosexuals (Firestein 2007), they frequently experience discrimination from homosexual groups as well (Ochs 1996). This additional sexual stigmatisation and resultant social and institutional discrimination have been documented as characteristic of the lived experience of bisexuals (Mohr *et al.* 2001). Dodge and Sandfort (2007) suggest that this increased burden is exacerbated by social and political divisions that exist between sexual minorities.

The increased social hardship for bisexuals has its genesis in a number of stereotypes of bisexuals from both heterosexuals and other sexual minorities. Whether described as biphobia or binegativity (Burleson 2005), it represents additional burdens for this sexual minority group category. How these specific burdens manifest in the lives of bisexuals are multiple and varied. Collectively, we call these manifestations bisexual burden.

Bisexual burden therefore represents as an umbrella category that recognises the diverse ways bisexuals are marginalised within society, beyond what gay and lesbians experience. Klein (1993) suggests bisexuals are stigmatised as being 1) neurotic, 2) unable to love, 3) sex crazed and 4) less capable of monogamy than those attracted to a single sex (see also Eliason 1997, Human Rights Campaign 2010). In addition to these factors, bisexuals also suffer from 5) negative stereotypes about their identifies from other sexual minorities, 6) being thought as confused about their sexual orientation, 7) or seen as being within a transitional phase (Burleson 2005, Diamond 2008). As a result, bisexuals are accused of 8) attention seeking, or 9) not being brave enough to fully come out (Eliason 1997).

The myths of bisexual burden manifest in other life difficulties for bisexuals, particularly concerning relationships. For example, when bisexuals are in a relationship with someone of the opposite gender, they are 10) frequently accused of holding on to heterosexual privilege (Burleson 2005); yet when they are in a relationship with the same gender, they are 11) either perceived as gay or accused of not being wholly out; again, seeming to cling to straight privilege (Firestein 2007).

Exemplifying the burden of bisexuality on relationships, when examining bisexual-heterosexual friendships of women compared to lesbian-heterosexual friendships, research shows that lesbians are more likely than bisexuals to have their non-heterosexual relationships recognised within friendship groups (Galupo 2007). Thus, the overwhelming social attitude toward bisexuality has been one of denial, erasure, and/or stigma—both from within the heterosexual world and the lesbian and gay communities (Barker and Langdrige 2008). These forms of burden are not an exhaustive list, but highlight the existence of a set of practices and beliefs that set bisexuals apart from gays and lesbians—important considerations for analysis.

The prejudice and stigma associated with bisexuality is compounded by the lack of academic research into bisexuality as a unique sexual identity. For example, Barker (2007) highlights that bisexuality is not even indexed in Piontek's (2006) *Queering Gay and Lesbian Studies*, suggesting queer theorists have not substantially engaged with the sexual identity. One reason for this is that bisexuals are often perceived to have *less* discrimination levied at them, despite recent research highlighting that bisexual youth have more negative experiences than their lesbian and gay peers (Robinson and Espelage 2011).

Prejudice and stigma is also compounded in near-total institutions, such as those of school settings. ;). For example, there has been a range of qualitative and quantitative research showing the prevalence of homophobia among secondary school/high school pupils (e.g., Epstein, O'Flynn & Telford 2003). However, some recent work suggests that, at least among older age-groups, this may be declining (e.g. McCormack 2012a). . We also highlight that quantitative studies examining homophobia in school systems have found considerably more bullying and harassment (Robinson and Espelage 2011) than do qualitative studies. While some of these studies, funded by gay charities, lack methodological and analytical rigour (eg. Hunt and Jensen 2007), others point to complexities of experience that may be dependent on geography, class, race and other factors that require multi-site data collection, data collection that lies beyond the scope of most qualitative work. For example, even though we find the results questionable, recent quantitative research by Robinson and Espelage (2011) on middle and high school heterosexual and LGBTQ students throughout the United States suggests that those self-identifying as bisexual think about committing and attempt suicide more than any other sexual orientation. The study found that 41.4% of bisexual students disclosed having seriously considered killing themselves in the 30 days prior to the study, in comparison to 14.5% of lesbian and gay students, 8.1% of heterosexual students and 6.1% of transgender students. Actual suicide attempts are also greater for bisexual students

than any other group, with 7% claiming to have attempted suicide in the previous 12 months (Robinson and Espelage 2011). These findings would therefore seem to indicate that declining cultural homophobia has little if any impact on biphobia. While our qualitative research cannot refute these statistics, we highlight that bisexuals can also live, open, and accepted lives free of such dire psychological consequences..

Decreasing Cultural Homophobia

Recent research documents that attitudes towards sex and sexuality are in a state of transition within Anglo-American cultures (Anderson *et al.* 2012, Curtice and Ormston 2012, McCormack 2012b); a change that is occurring most rapidly among youth (McCormack 2011a, Mustanski *et al.* 2010, Savin-Williams 2005). Recent decades have witnessed an erosion of conservative views and institutional control of sexual behaviours and relationships (Anderson 2008, Bogle 2008).

This liberalization of sexual behaviours and attitudes has occurred alongside a significantly expanded social and political landscape for gays and lesbians (Cretney 2006, Weeks 2007), where attitudes toward homosexuality are much improved among, particularly, heterosexual men (Anderson 2009, , Ripley *et al* 2012). In his ethnographic studies of sixth form colleges in the south of England, McCormack (2012b) found that heterosexual youth esteemed pro-gay attitudes, were inclusive of their lesbian, gay, transgendered and bisexual peers, and condemned homophobic practices as archaic and unacceptable. While it is possible that the more homophobic students may leave school at age 16, McCormack showed that the change in attitudes among the students of sixth form colleges was significant and profound. This adds to the earlier work of Savin-Williams (2005), who suggests that most American LGBT adolescents also lead normal, accepted lives—particularly among their peers. This is

something that Anderson (2011a) has found among even openly gay high school teamsport athletes in the United States, too.

Supporting this argument, when comparing 2002 National Survey of Family Growth data on 17 year-old girls against 2006-2008 data, there was an increase from 5 to 11 per cent in the number of girls engaging in some form of sexual contact with other girls. Significantly, opposite-sex sexual contact decreased from 63 to 46 per cent in the same time period (Gartrell *et al.* 2011). Taken together, these studies suggest that the operations of heteronormativity and homo/biphobia are eroding, particularly among youth .

While bisexuals suffer from the prejudices of both heterosexual and sexual minority groups, it seems likely that bisexual burden is at least somewhat correlated with homophobia. This is to say that while being bisexual will have its own unique social burdens than heterosexual, lesbian or gay youth (Robinson and Espelage 2011)—a key component of bisexual stigma is the same-sex component of bisexuality. Thus, if homophobia decreases the way Anderson (2009) suggests, we might also see a decrease in biphobia and a subsequent diminution of bisexual burden.

There is recent empirical evidence supporting this hypothesis. McCormack, Anderson and Adams (forthcoming) find that the experiences of bisexual boys are improved, with less experience of prejudice and discrimination than reported in the literature. Furthermore, in a study of 60 heterosexual male undergraduate athletes in America, almost all accepted bisexuality as a legitimate and non-stigmatised sexual identity (Anderson and Adams 2011). The men understood bisexuality in complex ways and most recognised aspects of bisexuality in their own identities. The authors suggest that these findings are a product of social liberalisation and an increased exposure to and contact with gay men. This has resulted in increasingly open discussions of sexual behaviours and identities; discussions that were once considered taboo.

With research showing that bisexual youths maintain elevated social and emotional difficulties compared to gay or lesbian youth, but that overall cultural discrimination against sexual minorities is declining, we set out to explore how these sociological phenomena affect the experiences of openly bisexual girls in British sixth form colleges. We desired to know if the experiences of bisexual girls parallel the positive results that others (Jones and Clarke 2007, McCormack 2012a, Savin-Williams 2005) have shown exist for gay male students. Furthermore, we sought to examine whether the multiple forms of extra-discrimination that comprise bisexual burden continue to operate in these students' lives, or if instead, decreasing homophobia has a corresponding decrease in biphobia.

Methods

Results of the qualitative research are drawn from a larger research project of 60 bisexuals in school systems. We divided the sample into quadrants, with 30 boys and 30 girls, each of whom represent 15 out and 15 in the closet. In this article we present the results of the fifteen openly bisexual female sixth form college students (aged 16-17) in the United Kingdom (13 from England, 1 from Scotland and 1 from Wales).

Given the issues of recruiting bisexual people (Hartman 2011, McCormack, Anderson & Adams 2013), and seeking to avoid locating participants already institutionalised into LGBT political or social organizations (see Savin-Williams 2005), we sought to improve the rigor of the sample by locating participants through a more diverse range of methods. Instead of snowball sampling we sent emails to the equality and diversity officers of colleges of further education throughout the UK, as well as searching for participants through the LGBTQ online forum, Gay Youth Corner (GYC.com).

We only interviewed one bisexual girl from any given school. While the number of participants is quite small, the geographical diversity of this research enables us to collect

multiple narratives established within a number of differing school cultures.. We also excluded bisexual girls who were not out to their peers (they were judged to be out of the closet if they had explicitly informed most of their friends and did not deny their sexual identity to peers at college). Data from those girls will be presented in a different article.

Interviews were conducted on the telephone, and digitally recorded. We made notes on the impressions of the conversations both during and immediately after the 45-60 minute interviews. Interviews were then transcribed and coded for themes relating to the girls' relationship to bisexuality and their college/peer cultures. All authors cross-coded for recurring themes providing inter-rater reliability on all 15 transcripts, and agreement was met on the codes and themes.

Finally, all ethical procedures recommended by the *British Educational Research Association* have been followed. This includes participant rights to view transcripts (none did), the right to withdrawal (none did) and making anonymous both the participants' names and the names of their sixth form.

Results

While research has traditionally depicted a bleak outlook for bisexual youth in schools, just six participants indicated some form of social discrimination after coming out. Amber, who attended a Catholic College, said that one of her best friends thought she would be sexually predatory because she was bisexual: 'It was pretty bad. She said, 'I can't be friends with you anymore in case you try to get with me.' A year later, Amber told us that her ex-friend still avoided her at school.

Sarah highlighted another aspect of bisexual burden. 'I never got teased or physically bullied if that's what you mean, but I did get some comments that bisexuality didn't exist.' She said, 'Some people didn't believe that I was *just* bisexual and made comments that I was

really just a lesbian. I think people used to talk about it a lot behind my back.’ Sarah added, ‘I didn’t have any other LGBT people at my college so it was something new to chat about in class.’

While these narratives are constant with some of the aspects previously described as bisexual burden, participants reported that they experienced less discrimination and marginalization as time progressed. Sarah, for example, said, ‘These days I don’t really get asked about it...people accept that I am bi and not gay.’ Other participants were clearer about how the initial erasure of their sexuality was replaced with its legitimization. Claire said that she came out through publicly kissing another girl at college. ‘The first time I kissed a girl one of my Muslim friends asked me how I could be so stupid. She said that she thought it was wrong and she didn’t speak to me for a week.’ Claire said that after that week, however, her friend apologized for what she said. Yet, even after the apology, the friend tried to negate Claire’s bisexuality for a few more weeks, ‘correcting’ Claire and calling her ‘bi-curious’ instead of her chosen label of bisexual. In time, however, the student accepted Claire as bisexual, and even declared that she was wrong for suggesting she wasn’t bisexual. Claire informed us that they re-established a friendship at this point.

What is interesting about Claire’s narrative is that when asked why her friend altered her belief system, Claire attributed this changed perspective to a positive form of social conformity, saying, ‘Because other girls just blanked her.’ This indicates that in Claire’s school, while some aspects of binegativity remain, there was a stronger cohort of students who do not accept this (see McCormack 2012b).

Rachael, aged 17, said that while her college experiences had been very affirming of her sexual orientation, there was a male student who did not accept her as bisexual:

This guy is Catholic, and he didn’t think that it was a good idea for me to be out and proud with the fact that I’m bisexual. I had some pretty

strange conversations about sexuality and religion with him, but it bothered me that he thought I should not be openly bisexual as he was openly straight because he thought God thought it was wrong. Over time he accepted me once again, but I do kind of resent him for using religion against me though.

Significantly, biphobic stereotypes and opinions were near-exclusively espoused from two demographics of students: 1) those with strong religious beliefs or, 2) those who were gay or lesbian. For example, while Katy, who is 16 years of age and white, described her coming out experience in very positive terms. When asked how often people accepted her bisexuality as legitimate she said, 'Pretty much all the time. I didn't have any negative reactions,' but she later recalled one negative experience: 'One gay guy said that he didn't think that I could be bisexual and was gay really. I don't know if he meant that comment or not.'

Leilah said that there were several openly gay (mostly male) students in her college who were not always accepting of her bisexuality, either. 'Some of them believe that I'm just in a transition phase of my life and that bisexuality doesn't really exist.' The experience of homosexuals doubting bisexuality is consistent with research into this aspect of double discrimination (Ochs 1996), supporting Anderson and Adam's (2011) suggestion that heterosexuals might be more open-minded to bisexuality than homosexuals.

Data from these interviews, however, suggests that those mistreating these bisexual girls only did so temporarily. A component of this effect – alongside other influences such as changing attitudes in the culture more broadly – was that peers (who are mostly heterosexual) generally would not stand for biphobia. Exemplifying this, Tamara told us that she was once (and only once) mistreated this way.

I had one guy say something really nasty once. In an aggressive way he said that I was greedy and was such a whore that I just wanted anything I could

get; that's why I was bisexual. But all my friends stood up for me and he got more bullied for saying the comment.

Without interviewing these individuals, it is unclear whether those who held negative views about bisexuality changed their perspectives or merely conformed to the social norms of the school culture. However, Amber suggested that attitudes could change. Supporting her statement she described how those who expressed aspects of bisexual burden later improved their views:

When I first came out one guy used to say that I'm in a phase and am going to be completely lesbian. I'm pretty sure he doesn't think that now though, I mean enough people disagreed with him that he must have re-evaluated what he thought.

The overall experience of coming out, Amber suggested, was still one of 'relief' adding that, 'I would definitely have come out sooner had I known it would be this non-event.'

Absence of Bisexual Burden

While there were still some aspects of bisexual burden in some participants' lives, the most significant finding from this research however concerns the relative lack of its manifestation. Supporting this thesis, data for nine of the openly bisexual girls demonstrates that they experienced no form of bisexual burden in college whatsoever. Most significantly, no participants reported being bullied or harassed for being openly bisexual. None reported feeling suicidal because of their sexuality, in the past or present.

For most participants, coming out actually had little impact on how they were perceived by or interacted with their peers. In fact, there was a strong theme of the mundane in their narratives of bisexual college life. When Ella, 17, was asked about whether she had any difficulties coming out, she simply responded, 'No.' When then asked if anyone at

college had suggested that bisexuality didn't exist; that she was actually a lesbian; or that she was confused, she responded, 'No. Why would they?'

Other students also had positive experiences of coming out. Daisy, who is mixed race and aged 17, had an affirming experience, saying, 'I've been accepted as part of the Emo group at school, and most of them call themselves bisexual anyway.' She added, 'These are new friends that I made because of coming out. They are all pretty open and liberal so they kind of fitted with who I am.' Daisy said that these new friends did not replace older ones, reporting that she encountered no difficulties in coming out to her college peers.

One of the reasons for Daisy's affirming college experience is that there were a number of sexual minorities in her school. While all but two participants said that there were other open sexual minorities out at their colleges, Daisy said there were approximately 60 other LGBT students at her school of 2,000 students, with 15 openly LGBT youth in the year below her. Thus, just as Savin-Williams (2005) described the everyday experience for American sexual minority youth as 'banal,' it seems that being a sexual minority, including being bisexual, is no longer a source of stigma at Daisy's college.

The Use of Social Media in Coming out

One reason for these positive reactions appears to emanate from a positive peer outlook on sexual minorities, including bisexuals (McCormack 2012b). This affirming culture is exemplified on Facebook. Tamara, a white 16 year-old living in Newcastle, came out to her peers through Facebook. She did so by changing her 'interested in' status from 'likes men' to 'likes men and women.' Tamara said, 'I just wanted to get it over and done with...It wasn't like it was a big deal because people probably knew already.' When asked about the response to the status update, Tamara said, 'I got loads of thumbs up, and some funny comments. It was great; and really supportive.' She continued:

I had a few comments asking if I was serious or if it was a joke. One person put “I always knew you were a rug muncher.” But then when she realized that I was serious, she sent me a message to say ‘sorry’ and that she didn’t mean it in a bad way.

Tamara replied to her friend that she found the comment funny, reporting that her friend asked in response, ‘What colour carpets do you prefer?’ Tamara interpreted this as banter that she found supportive, indicating that homosexually-themed discourse can be used to bond and show affirmation of difference the way McCormack (2011a) also describes.

One could take the perspective that the rug muncher comment was a manifestation of biphobia, but we reject this interpretation because Tamara insisted that it was both intended and interpreted as a piece of humour used to bond the two friends. While humour can be used to foster discrimination, McCormack (2011b) shows that it can also be used as a tool to show acceptance. Given that Tamara contextualized her friend’s comments as being supportive of her sexuality, we accord legitimacy to this perspective.

Further supporting this position, Simone, who is 17 and white, also came out via Facebook and Twitter. ‘I wanted to get it out to everyone; so that I wouldn’t have to keep answering the same questions to everyone I came out to.’ Simone indicated that ‘one or two people’ *might* have asked if it was just a phase, but she was unable to recall exact details or remember who it might have been. Here, Simone seemed to minimize some of the more problematic aspects of being bisexual. We suggest that this occurred for a specific social purpose in which sexual minorities may emphasise the positive aspects of their coming out experience because they were expecting matters to be worse; a form of what Anderson (2005) calls reverse relative deprivation.

Among all of those interviewed, including those who had some negative experiences, coming out was generally described in positive terms. Highlighting the lack of negative

emotional impact that coming out as bisexual had on the majority of participants, Simone said, ‘Yeah, there were some random questions and stuff, but you know, who cares – everyone was great.’ She adds, ‘I didn’t have any negative comments. I suspect that they kind of knew already though. It was generally a non-issue.’

Discussion

Recent literature on boys in English sixth form college settings indicates a rapidly changing relationship between masculinity and homophobia, documenting pro-gay attitudes among straight youth and the inclusion of LGBT students (Anderson 2011b, McCormack 2012a, 2012b). This should significantly reduce the strain of being a sexual minority in these settings, and thus reduce the effects of minority stress. However, bisexuals have been described as facing a double form of discrimination: social marginalisation from gays and lesbians as well as heterosexuals. This results in several forms of sexual stigma and denial above what gays and lesbians experience, manifestations of which we call ‘bisexual burden.’

In this research, we sought to examine for social inclusion/exclusion and acceptance of the legitimacy of female bisexuality in British college students by interviewing 15 openly bisexual girls about the extent to which they experience bisexual burden. The participants were leading well-adjusted lives (see also Savin-Williams 2005); supported by the facts that none of the 15 girls were bullied or felt suicidal, and nine of the students reported no aspects of bisexual burden whatsoever (even if we detected some in their narratives).

Collectively, the experiences of these 15 girls’ coming out experiences in their sixth form colleges suggests that they receive support from the vast majority of their peers, with the exception of a very small minority who experienced some component of bisexual burden in their coming out.

Building on other recent literature on the subject (Anderson 2011b, McCormack 2012a, Savin-Williams 2005), it also seems that explicit forms of homophobia and biphobia are unacceptable within youth peer culture at this level of education, among student populations of these particular schools. Further evidence of this comes through the , ethnographic research of three sixth forms in the south of England, where McCormack (2012b) found the overt expression of homophobia to be stigmatized by heterosexual youth, and openly LGBT peers were socially included.

It is important to note, however, that while our study only focused on sixth form experiences, evidence emerged in some of the interviews that elevated rates of homo/biphobia might nonetheless exist at the lower levels of schooling (Palotta-Chiarolli 2010). This was mostly out of scope of this research project, but we hypothesize that the difference that we suggest exists between school and college is partially attributable to their peers growing accustomed to sexual diversity; and it is also likely represents increased inclusivity that comes from students with educational aspirations (McCormack 2012b). Further research is required to adequately explore homo/biphobia and bisexual burden among younger students, particularly given other research that indicates relatively little difference in attitudes between the schools (author et al forthcoming).

The negative experiences recounted here are restricted to various aspects of bisexual burden, and there is no evidence to demonstrate this had lasting psychological or emotional effects on the well-being or school experiences of the fifteen participants. When negative experiences did occur, they were predominantly received from an individual, who subsequently acculturated to the larger more inclusive culture of this particular age group.

It is, of course, possible that some of our participants may have experienced aspects of the burden without being able to recall it: that the overwhelming positive support overshadowed their memories of negative experiences. It is also possible that some of the

participants overplayed their support as a mechanism of reverse relative deprivation, where negative interactions were experienced positively because they were expecting far worse.

Those who did recall aspects of bisexual burden found that the mistreatment was usually from students with strong religious beliefs or gay or lesbian students who accused the participant of not fully coming out. Furthermore, the presence of bisexual burden decreased shortly after coming out, with most participants reporting no form of bisexual discrimination after a week of being open about their sexual identity. This is something that appears to be facilitated by collective peer pressure, exemplified by positive postings on Facebook. While it is possible that social conformity operates to prevent biphobic students expressing their views on this social media, this has the effect that such views are shielded from the participants.

The experiences of bisexual girls in these sixth forms in the UK supports a growing body of research that documents increasingly positive experiences of sexual minority youth in British and American cultures. However, generalizations must be limited. Declining homophobia is an uneven social process and we do not wish to generalize beyond these participants. Accordingly, this research indicates that the bisexual girls within *these* fifteen colleges were supported by the vast majority of students who ostensibly accept bisexual peers without difficulty.. There are a number of variables that must be taken into consideration when examining for sexual prejudice: race, class and religious affiliation being just a few, and we did not control for all of these with this study. Consequently, positive findings from this study will not reflect all youth cultures, in all school settings. However, it is important that we do not assume other school youth cultures to be necessarily less tolerant of bisexuality, either. Matters are changing rapidly for sexual minorities in the UK.

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